

I wouldn't blame you, if after hearing today's Gospel reading, you decided to make a bee-line to your car and headed home. This is a terrible story. Perhaps we should skip this story and read the next one instead. It's a much happier story in which Jesus feeds 5,000 people. Isn't that an interesting coincidence that two stories about meals are set together in Mark's gospel, or is it? Mark is a very careful writer. Perhaps he wants us to hear these two stories together. Even though we didn't read the other story I think it is familiar to us all. Mark's telling of it is noteworthy for its emphasis on contrasts.

Jesus withdrew to be alone...but a great crowd followed him.

It was a deserted place...but it became an abundant place.

The disciples said, "Send the people away"; but Jesus said, "You give them something to eat."

There were only 5 loaves and 2 fish, but 5,000 ate their fill and 12 baskets of leftovers were collected.

The contrasts in the story are striking, but it is the contrast between Jesus' banquet of life and Herod's banquet of death on which I want to focus this morning. Listen to a novelist's portrayal of Herod's banquet.

Herod Antipas, who calls himself king of Perea and of all Galilee,...--though he is king in nothing but name; Herod Antipas, still striving for the power and glory of his father...; Herod Antipas, who stole his present wife from his brother; Herod Antipas, who is weak before his wife, but like the peacock, must display his strength in color and feathers and spectacle, gave himself a birthday party.

He made it a grand banquet, inviting his stewards, his topmost officials from everywhere in Galilee and Perea, inviting his military commanders as well, and granting them all quarters in the apartments of high Machaerus, which affords its guest a sweeping view of the Dead Sea and the hills beyond. Such magnificence governed by such meanness.

There is a fine hall in that palace, the painted ceiling supported by a forest of stone columns, tables enough to accommodate half a hundred diners, and space for their entertainment both during and after the banquet.

And lamps! So many lamps of brass and silver and alabaster, that there were no shadows in the room. They hung by chains from the roof beams; they flickered in niches every three feet along the walls; they stood on stands and sat on the tables and warmed the room. And as the banquet passed from eating to drinking, they lit the faces of Herod's friends with a moist and rosy glow. Wine, to gladden the hearts of flush-faced men.

Musicians played and singers sang.

Musicians played; a pretty little girl walked a leopard through the room. They were chained together, neck to neck. Herod laughed loudly, praising the show; then all the guests expressed their delight by slapping the tables....

Musicians played, and dancers danced. And then came the dancer that silenced the room."
(Jesus: A Novel by Walter Wangerin, Jr.)

This feast was not in a deserted place, but a lavish palace. Herod's wife, Herodias, was there, even though she shouldn't have been. Herod had stolen her from his brother. John the Baptist had condemned this unlawful liaison and for that was imprisoned.

In many ways this story is a sad vignette of how things too often go in this sordid world. Here we read that John the Baptist, the herald of God's Messiah, was martyred because of a boozy promise made by an oversexed king who had been turned on by the seductive dance of a teenager. This was not a calculated effort by Herod to silence a critic. Instead, it was a stupid, against-his-better-judgment, decision to save face with his guests after making a foolish promise to his wife's daughter. So grief-stricken, Herod gave the command and soon the head of John the Baptist was brought out on a platter, as though it was the final course of the debauched meal. This was a very different banquet. Not the abundance of Jesus' feast. Not twelve baskets of food remaining, but a single, horrifying leftover.

Herod could have made a different choice, but the empire had replaced God in his life. Though he was fascinated to listen to John the Baptist, he couldn't lose face in front of his A-list guests to spare John's life. Power and concern for his reputation shaped Herod's values and his decisions. Doing justice and ruling compassionately with concern for the least in his kingdom was not on Herod's agenda, even though John's preaching haunted him so much that when he heard of Jesus' ministry his first thought was that John the Baptist had come back from the dead.

What, then, are we to make of these two stories? The first takeaway for me is one that should be obvious. It is about where we place our trust. The sordid behavior of Herod is a reminder to the church of the degree to which those in power will abuse their power in order to maintain it. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, there is a cost to discipleship.

The story of John the Baptist's execution foreshadowed what lay ahead of Jesus; the verdict of Pilate to crucify Jesus, even though he found him to be innocent. Yet, even as we acknowledge the reluctance of earthly rulers and institutions to use power to do justice and practice compassion, we find hope in Jesus' alternative vision of God's transforming love that could not be extinguished even by the cross and tomb.

When the hour grew late, the disciples said, "This is a deserted place...send the crowds away so they may go into the village and buy food for themselves." Everything rational shouts, "Good idea!" Herod would have said, "Great idea!" Send them away. But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Then, using the meager resources at hand, he blessed and broke the bread and gave it to the disciples to distribute and everyone, all of them, men, women, and children, were fed.

The deserted place in which there was no food was transformed into a place of abundance because that is God's intention for this world. God's vision of abundance for all is the promise that is more potent than the threats and efforts of any principalities and powers to snuff out. Trusting in the abundance of God is the mission for which God claimed us so we can live into the fullness of our humanity.

Our lives are filled with choices. Herod chose power and presided over a banquet of death. Jesus called his disciples—and us-- to make a choice: "You give them something to eat." They could have said "no" believing they only had enough to feed themselves. But Jesus called them beyond themselves. He called them and us to trust the promises of God to use our resources to create a world

of abundance. They did have something to offer, and so do we. As we observe the world, especially the needs of those who live on the margins, needs for health care, food, jobs, clean water and air, justice; we can do so from the perspective of God's vision of life in abundance. Jesus will bless and multiply what we bring. When that happens, there will be a banquet of life for everyone.

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